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PROGRAM As It Happens

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SUBJECT Arkady Shevchenko/Spying

ALAN MAITLAND: "I swore at myself, locked in bumper-to-bumper traffic in the middle of New York's Queensboro Bridge. I poured out my anger in Russian invective, cursing myself for not anticipating the traffic jam, exasperated at the prospect of disruption of my carefully laid plans. Tonight, of all nights, I couldn't be late for this critically important meeting.

"I had learned to coexist with the KGB, accepting their threats and intrusions throughout my life and work. But finally, this evening, I was going to try and escape them for good."

So writes Soviet defector Arkady Shevchenko, author of the current bestseller Breaking with Moscow. Shevchenko caused a sensation in the '70s when he went over to the Americans, and he's told a gripping tale of how he became a super-mole for the CIA while serving as Undersecretary General of the United Nations.

The juicy details of how he spied for Washington and why lace the pages of this book. But a blistering review in The New Republic magazine says Shevchenko has spun a tall tale and was minor-mole, not super-spy.

We reached the reviewer, Edward J. Epstein, in London.

PETER DOWNING: Mr. Epstein, when did you first doubt Shevchenko's story?

EDWARD EPSTEIN: When I read the interviews with Khrushchev that he claimed to have had. Here was a 28-year-old junior diplomat traveling with the head of state. And the idea

that he had private conferences with Khrushchev seemed to me extraordinary.

And then I happened to meet Henry Hurt, who's the Reader's Digest editor, and Hurt told me that he had interviewed Shevchenko in 1980. He'd asked Shevchenko specifically whether he had had a chance to speak to Khrushchev about some matter, and he told Hurt that how could, you know, "I have an interview with Khrushchev?" You know, "I was just a very junior person."

And so then I began to wonder whether the entire book had been made up.

DOWNING: Well, let's start with the very first paragraph in the book. Mr. Shevchenko is writing about his first contact with American Intelligence and how he was swearing at himself, caught on a bridge, the Queensboro Bridge in New York in traffic, and that this was going to throw his, as he calls them, carefully laid plans out the window.

Is it your contention that he had no carefully laid plan?

EPSTEIN: Well, my contention is that the book was written by a novelist, and so therefore I decided to check whatever facts were in the book, and in that opening of the book with the car chase, what the prerequisite was for driving a car and having a car chase and getting a speeding ticket with a driver's license. In America it's very easy to check whether someone has a driver's license. You only need their date of birth.

So I called the Motor Vehicle Bureau and I checked the archives of the international driver's license and I found that the first time he had ever had a license in America -- and he had never had an international license -- was October 1977, which was more than a year after this entire incident took place.

His account of it is fictitious. You know, a spy can write a novel, and a novelist can be a spy. But, you know, I was reviewing the book.

DOWNING: What else did you find to be false?

EPSTEIN: Well, in the book he gives an account of his espionage, and he sets most of the espionage in the year 1975. But then Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who aside from being the Ambassador to the United Nations at the time, later was the Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence, wrote in the New York Times, himself, very specifically, that his first contact with the United States was in December of 1975. And when you go

through after that first contact, you realize he couldn't have started spying till 1976. And therefore everything he says in 1975 has to be fictitious, because he wasn't in contact with the Americans in 1975.

DOWNING: What about his own importance? Was that blown up in the book?

EPSTEIN: I can only go through the claims he made in the book. But meeting after meeting that he describes with Soviet officials, I found the Soviet officials -- and he dated them himself by saying, for example when he was speaking to the KGB residente, he dated the meeting to just before he was replaced by another Soviet residente. And the date of that was July 1975. And yet the entire meeting, he says, was 1976. So that entire meeting had to be fictitious.

Now, when someone writes a book of nonfiction, a book of history, you know, they're not entitled to fictionalize scenes, to make up characters, to make up interviews. And there's no real reason to give any credence at all to Shevchenko. I mean if he was still with the Soviet delegation and he wrote this book, no one would believe a word of it.

My contention is he's writing a novel. That doesn't mean that there isn't some things that are true about Shevchenko. It means that the book that has been passed off to the world public as a true-life story is a fiction. And in that sense, it's a fraud.

DOWNING: It was passed off as nonfiction to media organizations like CBS and Time. They certainly went to some lengths, apparently, to check out Mr. Shevchenko's story.

EPSTEIN: In the case of CBS, to be fair to CBS, you know, they had very credible witnesses appear on television and say that this man was a major intelligence source.

Time magazine, it's interesting. Many of the fictions that I found in the novel were actually not in the Time magazine abridgement. So they might have -- I don't know what their processes were, but they might very well have caught the fact that he didn't have a driver's license, or some of the meetings couldn't have taken place.

They did have other major fictions. For example, they could have checked the date that this Soviet residente left the country.

It's interesting to me because if they began to find that part of the book was fictionalized, rather than telling

their audience that, they just attempted to fudge over those areas and print the other areas. In a sense, it's more serious than not doing fact-checking at all.

DOWNING: They certainly called him the CIA's most successful spy.

EPSTEIN: Well, he wasn't a very successful spy. I have spoken to many people in the intelligence community who considered him to be basically worthless. That doesn't mean -- that's not to say he didn't have some contact with American Intelligence.

But Time magazine also, let me point out, in 1980 said that he was absolutely worthless as a spy.

DOWNING: Have you tried to contact Mr. Shevchenko himself to put your findings to him, or have you had any reaction from him?

EPSTEIN: I called him without getting any response. And, you know, it's rather interesting because when my article appeared, the New York Times tried to call him, as well as numerous other people. And his agent and his editor, Asheville Green, who speaks for him, said he was out of the country. During this entire period, he was at his home address in Washington. So he was just hiding out and was refusing to speak to anyone.

DOWNING: Mr. Epstein, I'm glad we got to talk to you. Thank you.